

Idaho parks, police may keep money for now

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Legislators want to delay a deal that would deliver some money Gov. Butch Otter wants for roads.

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That plan to shift gas tax money away from Idaho's parks department and state police and spend it on roads instead? Forget about it — at least for another year.

That's what lawmakers on a special joint legislative task force recommended this week after hours of hearings that stretched through the summer to find alternative funding for the two state agencies.

"I wish we had a more concrete answer, but we don't," said task force Co-Chairman Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert.

The task force voted unanimously to recommend that the full Legislature delay the shifts — a key piece of a legislative session-ending compromise this year with Otter — until July 1, 2011. The task force also declared its intent to permanently reverse the decision to take the gas tax money away from parks.

Lawmakers said they were comfortable with the delay for two reasons: One, the Idaho Transportation Department has saved millions this year because bids for highway contracts are coming in lower than expected. Two, another task force — the governor's transportation funding task force — is just starting its work and will work through the next year.

"We do have some breathing room," said Sen. Jim Hammond, R-Post Falls.

Otter aide Jon Hanian told The Associated Press his boss isn't perturbed by the delay.

"He's OK with it, if they want to do that, roll it into part of the work that they are going to be doing on the task

ITD: WE'LL WITHHOLD \$8.6 MILLION IN SPENDING

The Idaho Transportation Department says it will not spend the money this fiscal year because of declining revenue.

The Legislature appropriated \$251 million in state funds to the department before lawmakers adjourned in May. ITD's current funding sources are expected to generate \$242.4 million, a shortfall of 3.4 percent, said ITD Acting Director Scott Stokes.

The savings will come from the contract construction program. But no projects actually will be cut because the department delayed decisions on some projects until an economic forecast was finished in Au-

gust.

Gov. Butch Otter on Friday directed all state general fund agencies to reduce their current budgets to offset a \$151 million shortfall in this year's state budget. ITD does not receive any general fund money. It obtains most of its revenue from federal and state fuel tax receipts and vehicle registration fees. State and federal fuel tax receipts are down because people are driving less and driving more fuel-efficient cars.

ITD says it has reduced administrative costs by more than 10 percent in the past two years.

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force," Hanian said. "He understands the concerns, but keep in mind what the goal and purpose is: to provide a long-term, ongoing, stable funding solution to these problems for transportation."

Off-road recreationists from around the state, including boaters, snowmobilers and ATV riders, deluged the task force with pleas not to take away the 3 percent of Idaho's gasoline taxes that goes to state parks for trails and waterways improvements. That money was designated for parks in a 1972 deal to make up for taxes paid on gas used off-road.

"We have all learned that we made a mistake here," said Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Eagle.

Off-road recreation advocate Sandra Mitchell said she "reluctantly" supported the one-year delay. "We do believe that it is wise to wait," she told the lawmakers. "We trust ... that you are going to do the right thing, and the right thing is to give us back our gas tax."

Mitchell also said she trusted that the lawmakers would be re-elected. Every seat in the Legislature is up for election in 2010's general election.

Idaho's parks stood to lose nearly \$4.3 million and 10 positions next July 1 if lawmakers had taken no action. For the state police, the potential loss was more than \$15 million.

"This is an area where we need a revenue stream — we need a dedicated revenue stream," said Rep. Maxine Bell, R-Jerome, "and again, we're treading right into the governor's task force." Lawmakers on the panel could pick a new funding source for ISP, she said, but it could clash with what that task force decides to do.

The panel looked at an array of proposals for ISP funding, including a \$1 monthly surcharge on car insurance, which would raise \$19.4 million a year, and a \$3 fee on tire sales, to raise \$4.8 million a year.

The Associated Press contributed.